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SUBJECT: BENUE STATE GOVERNOR SAYS OBASANJO INTENDS TO STAY

Classified By: Ambassador John Campbell for Reasons 1.4 (b and d)

¶1. (S) SUMMARY. Benue State Governor George Akume paid a courtesy call on the Ambassador August 16. Also present were two of Akume's advisors, House of Representatives member Tengo Tsegba, and PolOff. Akume's central message was that President Obasanjo intends to stay in office but could be persuaded to leave by the United States and the United Kingdom. President Obasanjo scheduled a meeting later on August 16 to test the political waters with members of the PDP caucus in the National Assembly. Akume also implied official complicity in a recent string of political murders, reiterated that the original agreement between Obasanjo and northern political leaders in 1999 was for Obasanjo to serve only four years, and said that elections were not held in some parts of Nigeria in 2003. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (C) According to Akume, Obasanjo is motivated to stay in office by fear that he will be prosecuted for financial crimes once he leaves and by his desire to maintain a position on the world stage. Akume believes, however, that Obasanjo might yet be persuaded to leave if the US and the UK could offer him private assurances that no ill would befall him after leaving office and if they offered Obasanjo some continued role in international politics. According to Akume, if the US and UK were to make public pronouncements protecting Obasanjo, no Nigerian political leader would dare oppose that pronouncement in future. Akume said that Obasanjo gave large cash bribes to legislators who supported the third-term constitutional amendment. Some of those legislators so angered their constituents that they can only go home now with a security escort.

¶3. (C) Akume said that Obasanjo called a meeting with the PDP legislative caucus later on August 16. According to Tsegba, the purpose of the meeting was to discuss what the National Assembly's response would be if elections were not held in 2007. Newspaper accounts on August 17 said that the meeting was held to discuss general political strategy, funding for a planned Lagos to Kano rail line, and to provide anti-third term legislators a forum to seek assurances that their positions would not be held against them. In a phone call with PolOff on the 17th, Tsegba said that the rail line was indeed the main focus of the meeting. However, it was presented by the president as his "vision for the next four or five years." Obasanjo did not explicitly ask for more time in office, but that is how the legislators present understood the discussion. According to Tsegba, the PDP caucus was not receptive to the notion of additional time in office and advised the president that the rail project should be designed in such a way that any future president could see it through.

¶4. (S) Disturbingly, Akume implied official complicity in a string of recent political murders. Many of these killings

have targeted leading candidates within the PDP. Akume gave names neither of those involved in the killings nor of which of the deceased were the victims of a murder sanctioned by government officials.

¶5. (C) Akume explained that a grand bargain had been negotiated in 1999 between Obasanjo and political leaders from the north. Instrumental to negotiating this agreement was Iyorchia Ayu, a former President of the Senate who went on to hold multiple cabinet posts in the Obasanjo administration. (Note: Ayu has since left the Obasanjo administration and is heading the presidential campaign team of Vice President Atiku Abubakar. End Note.) The agreement was that Obasanjo would only serve one term, and that the Presidency would then revert to the North. When Obasanjo decided to run again in 2003, he made a show of having PDP leaders including Akume come to his chicken farm in southwestern Nigeria to "beg" him to run again.

¶6. (S) Akume alleges that the elections in 2003 were highly irregular. He says that Obasanjo "barely won" in Benue State, and that in some regions of Nigeria results were reported without elections even having been held. He conceded that good elections had been held in 1993 and that elections had been organized on short notice in 1999. Based on that experience, it is still possible for Nigeria to hold successful elections in 2007. However, Akime does not see preparations being made for the elections and he believes this is because Obasanjo intends to stay.

¶7. (C) COMMENT: Akume is a member of the PDP who opposed the third term and is supporting Atiku's presidential bid. We believe he will leave the PDP shortly after Atiku does. His political opposition to the president certainly colors his views of Obasanjo's intentions. However, his argument that

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Obasanjo intends to stay in office is consistent with local political chatter and with Tsegba's report of the PDP caucus.

While the embassy will continue to say publicly that elections were held in 1999 and 2003 and that we expect successful elections to be held in 2007, we concur that the GON is not moving aggressively to prepare for those elections. Akume probably overstates the ability of the US and UK to "reassure" Obasanjo that he will not be prosecuted for alleged crimes after leaving office. We also note that neither the President nor his close political associates have ever approached us for help with a "soft landing." END

COMMENT.

CAMPBELL